

'LIVE AND LETTERS SERIES

No 1

GENERAL EDITOR
YUSUF MEHRALY

SARAT CHANDRA CHATTERJEE

BY
HUMAYUN KABIR



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SARAT CHANDRA CHATTERJEE

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TO

BIHARATI SARABHAI

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KALIDASA—A STUDY

To Follow

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

SHANKARACHARYA

SAINTS OF MEDIEVAL INDIA

SIR PHIROZSHAH MEHTA

INTRODUCTION

BY

YUSUF MEHERALLY

I.

The last time that I met Sarat Chandra Chatterjee was some time before his death. I had no idea then, that this was to be our very last meeting. The occasion was a conference at Calcutta and he was present at one of the functions. After it was over, we went out for a chat.

Sarat Babu had been ailing for some time, and sustained work had become most difficult for him. He had been strictly warned by doctors to take complete rest, but all this did not fit into his restless temperament.

"What sort of books do you most enjoy reading?" I asked him.

"Of late, owing to indifferent health, continued reading is not easy for me," came the reply. "The only ones that I can now enjoy reading are books on science."

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"Science?" I exclaimed "I expected you will say "literature"

"In fact" he replied, "you will be surprised to hear that I cannot bear to read through any novel nowadays"

"Nice indeed" I said, "Imagine one who has written any number of novels himself, and which are eagerly read by thousands should himself not be able to enjoy reading one! Looks to me, as if this is poetic justice"

He smiled We drifted on to other subjects He plied me with questions on the political situation At last I said, "I feel happy that unlike some other eminent men of letters, in India as well as outside, you do not believe in the refuge of the Ivory Tower"

"On the contrary," he warmed up, "I have always held that far from keeping away from public affairs, creative artists have an additional responsibility In every country, the burden of helping to build a happier future, rests to no small extent, with its men of letters and educationists If they shirk this obvious task, what sort of future will there be? In India, foreign rule provides an extra incentive and

working for freedom becomes everybody's duty "

Talking to him, the idea struck me that here was a writer whose greatness had not come in the way of his identifying himself with the people and their aspirations. Thousands idolized him, and yet his work is scarcely known to the English reading public. I mentioned this to Humayun Kabir and the present study is a result of our conversation.

II

Professor Humayun Kabir's very able monograph is to my knowledge the very first book on Sarat Chandra Chatterjee to appear in the English language. This is a matter of no little surprise in view of Sarat Babu's great popularity all over India. His works have been translated into all leading Indian languages and have not only gone through several editions, but quite a few of them have been best sellers. The publication of this little book, therefore, seems to me to be very opportune and will fill in a long felt need.

Professor Humayun Kabir has done a competent job, giving praise, but at the

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same time balancing high appreciation with necessary criticism. He takes us, as it were, on a literary tour round Sarat Chandra's works, probes into his ideas, unfolds the beauties of his style and expression and reveals to us the background of his literary efforts. He has, however, not touched upon the personal details of Sarat Babu's life, and hence, I feel it necessary to deal with them briefly here.

III

Sarat Chandra, the man, is as interesting as Sarat Chandra the writer, and the story of his life is full of strange vicissitudes.

At the age of twenty seven, he left for Burma, homeless and unknown. When he arrived at Rangoon, he had just two rupees left in his pocket. A kind uncle, well established in life, welcomed him to his home. But as luck would have it, the uncle died soon after, leaving his affairs in confusion and Sarat again started life from scratch.

After many attempts in vain, he was able to get a clerical post in the office of the Examiner of Public Works and Accounts on a paltry salary. For this he

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was indebted to his beautiful voice His uncle, Aghora Babu, had introduced him to the local Bengalee community and Sarat, who was very fond of music and was a splendid singer, became something of a favourite One of the persons whom he thus met, Mr M K Mitra, had been attracted to the young man, and offered him a clerical job under him

It was only now for the first time in his life that Sarat Chandra got a chance for serious study In his earlier years poverty had compelled him to give up college, for he was unable to pay the examination fees for the F Y A Class After many years of hard life, opportunity again offered itself and he hungrily devoured the writings of Mill, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and other authors from Mr Mitra's library He read and re-read the literary masterpieces of Rabindranath Tagore, and of course, a great deal besides

IV

All this filled Sarat Chandra with new and strange yearnings which he did not quite succeed in analysing even to himself His mind travelled back to his boyhood

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days His father Matilal Chattopadhyaya had combined a literary temperament with easy-going ways Earning a livelihood bored him Sarat was the second of his seven children and the burden of this large family proved too much for him He, therefore, moved from the village of Devnandpur in the Hooghly district, where Sarat had been born on 15th September, 1876, to the town of Bhagalpur, to the home of his wife's brother

Sarat's father dabbled in almost every form of literature He wrote poems, plays, short stories, novels, but curiously enough, he left them all unfinished He would leave his brother-in-law's place in temper, find a job, get tired of it soon, return back again and embark upon another literary work Young Sarat would read these fragments in rapture and pass whole nights awake, wondering how the stories would end He became so interested that he began writing himself He was then just seventeen years old Bengal was full of Tagore and the sensitive youth, after reading one of Tagore's stories, would tear up his own He made the high resolve not to publish any of his work till it was as good as Tagore's!

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A group of enthusiastic youngsters had at this time formed a literary society at Bhagalpur and Sarat was its president. The members met, off and on, to study the writings of Rabindranath. Occasionally one of them would also write something and the group then discussed such writings too. They conducted also, a small hand-written monthly called *Chhaya* and several of Sarat's earlier writings were published in this *Journal*.

But these efforts were soon discontinued, the bitter medicine of poverty did not agree with a literary life. Once, after a quarrel, Sarat ran away from home and wandered penniless from place to place, visiting many different towns, in the guise of a Sanyasi. During these wanderings he came into contact with all sorts of people and thus got an insight into their lives. He returned home, but years went by before Sarat Chandra set his pen to paper again.

V.

It was a chance circumstance that started him on the road to literary fame. While in Calcutta once, on a short leave from Rangoon, he ran into some of the

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friends of his boyhood. They had just started a literary journal called *Yamuna*, and pressed him to write for it. He pleaded hard, saying that he had not written a word for years, but they would take no refusal. At last, more with a view to get out of an awkward situation, than of keeping his promise, he agreed to write. But in Rangoon numerous reminders forced him to make good his promise. The story appeared in *Yamuna* and created a stir. The writer became famous overnight. It was published anonymously and several critics attributed it to Rabindranath. When the great poet denied its authorship it was felt that a new literary star had been born.

Sarat now started giving more time to writing. His *Bari Didī* was serialized in the *Bharati* magazine. In its last instalment his name was given as the writer. But, so great was his shyness, that when his friends in Rangoon asked him if he was the author, he stoutly denied it, protesting that it was just an accidental similarity in name.

Sarat Babu now continued to write in a steady flow. Several of his stories and

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articles appeared in *Yamuna* and they included *Parinita*, *Chandranath* and *Charitraheen*. These and other publications further strengthened his literary reputation. The famous Bengali dramatist, Dwijendralal Roy invited him to write for the *Bharatvarsh* magazine and in the course of years, Sarat Chandra became one of the famous journals' most outstanding and consistent contributors. Some of his best known novels—*Shrikant*, *Datta*, *Pallī Samaj*, *Grihadah*, among others, appeared in its pages.

In 1913, his health completely broke down, and he was advised, on medical grounds to leave Burma. He had remained in that country for ten years and was now drawing a salary of Rs 100/- per month. The doctor's advice appeared particularly difficult to follow, because of financial difficulties. He hesitated to leave a secured job for an uncertain future. A little earlier, he had sold four of his stories for a small amount to a Calcutta Publisher who was not slow to discern his promise as a writer. He now came forward to give him a monthly guarantee of Rs 100/- and on the strength of that promise he came to stay at Calcutta.

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His writings were now the rage of Bengal and his fame grew from year to year. Deshbandhu Das invited him to write for his journal, *Narayan*. Sarat Chandra responded promptly. Deshbandhu was so delighted with the story—*Suami*—that he sent him a blank cheque with a covering letter saying that he would not venture to put a price on a story, by such an incomparable artist, and that Sarat Babu could fill in his own figure. Deshbandhu Das was then one of the foremost lawyers in the country and Sarat Chandra could have put in any figure, but he only drew Rs. 100/-.

His great popularity at this time could be measured by the fact that *Pather Dabi* published at Rs. 3/- sold 1,000 copies on the first day of publication. This was a new record. The first edition of 3,000 copies was sold out within a month, and the second edition of 5,000 in less than three. And this despite the fact that *Pather Dabi* had appeared as a serial in *Bangabani* magazine for nearly two years. Subsequently the Bengal Government proscribed the book for its political sentiments.

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Sarat Chandra is best known to us as a story writer. Several of his stories were dramatised and produced by amateur artists. Later, the famous Sisir Kumar Bhaduri's Company successfully produced several of them on stage. Quite a number of them have likewise been filmed and have met with great success on the screen.

VI

No two writers of genius have the same method of writing or the same approach to questions. Sarat Chandra's methods were peculiar to himself. Unlike other writers he did not work out the entire plot of the story before hand. He decided upon the theme in a general way, picked out some of the leading characters and allotted to them the parts he wanted to play. Often, he commenced writing the middle or even the final portion of the book first, as the idea seized him, and worked out the beginning subsequently. Thus, for example was his *Charitraheen* written.

He seldom wrote in a hurry. He revised the manuscript several times and often made many changes. He put in a great deal of hard work and paid particular attention to style. Writing to him was a

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great 'spiritual' effort, he just did not write in a torrent of words

Few writers indeed have written so voluminously, and his published writings go into many volumes. To have created dozens of characters and made them live, is a great tribute to his creative genius. He had above all, the art of narrating simple and ordinary incidents in a most acceptable and attractive manner. His skill in dialogue is exceptional. And he makes free and frequent use of irony and satire.

Many of his books have Bengal's social conditions as their background and Bengal has been the home of zemindars, and the zemindari system. The society that is depicted in his novels is the middle and upper class zemindari society, described with a frankness that has almost a Tolstoyan flavour. The evils of absentee landlordism, the petty intrigues that play so large a part in their lives, their extravagance, their adventures in manners and morals are all described in all its grim reality. [We are presented with a picture of a social class in the process of decay and disintegration.]

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Side by side, there is the unerring reflection of life in the Bengal villages and the picture is not a flattering one. In his *Palli Samaj*, we see the villages steeped in illiteracy, superstition, and in the grip of out-worn customs. Isolated efforts at rousing up the villagers have not been a conspicuous success and uplift workers from the cities have soon left in disgust. Did this indicate that Sarat Chandra had lost faith in the villages? Certainly not. He depicts village life as he finds it, with no attempt at idealization. He has seen it at close quarters and does not minimize the difficulties in the way of progress. To him difficulties are, if anything, an added incentive. He himself preferred to live in a village and it was only the insistence of his wife, Hiranyamayi Devi, that got him back to Calcutta.

VII.

The eccentricities of men of genius have been a favourite topic in biography. It has been said that in his later years Charles Dickens greatly preferred to do no writing until he was seated in the same position on the same chair, before the same

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table, near a certain window commanding a particular view, that Emile Zola could not write until there was a particular picture on his table. It is interesting therefore, to speculate upon the eccentricities of Sarat Chandra.

Once established, Sarat Chandra wrote only on expensive papers. Good stationery was to him a tribute to art. There must scarcely be any other writer who wrote his books and stories on such consistently good and expensive paper. He always used a fat and large fountain pen with a very finely pointed nib and wrote in a very shapely and pretty hand.

He could not do without Hooklah even for a short time and even when he was writing it was in constant use. He was also very fond of tea—and usually took several cups at a time and several times a day.

He also dabbled in homoeopathy and bio chemistry and often distributed microscopic pills to villagers in need at his own expense. He had no children but was very fond of domestic pets—birds squirrels dogs.

VIII

Sarat Chandra's place in Indian literature is secure. He has also a place in world literature. But what of the future? How will it appraise his work? Prophecy is seldom easy. Such a thought occurs, because his mental make-up is not revolutionary. His treatment of social tendencies is generally cautious. His analysis of the ills that beset society is brilliant, but he offers no modern solutions to age-old problems. Rather, he looks to the past, to solve the difficulties of the present, and there is no suggestion in his writings of a radical re-orientation of the social system.

At the same time, he is a great artist and he has left to us a rich legacy. He is certainly the greatest novelist, India has produced in recent times. To his great popularity are added a complexity of design, a charm of style, a narrative dexterity and an unusual skill at characterization. There are qualities, which changes in literary fashions cannot easily overwhelm.

His last years were full of honours and comfort, though his health was failing.

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him. The Dacca University conferred upon him an Honorary Doctorate. He received a measure of affection from the reading public that has indeed been given to few. When he passed away on the 16th January, 1938 in his sixty-second year, a mammoth procession of mourners accompanied his last remains to the cremation ground. His death closed an epoch in literature.

THE AUTHOR

Born 1906 After a brilliant career at Calcutta and Oxford, Humayun Kabir returned to India and was appointed a Professor at the Calcutta University He missed by only three votes, the coveted honour of being President of the Oxford Union

Humayun Kabir takes a keen interest in public affairs He is a member of the Bengal Legislative Council and one of the leaders of the Krishak Proja Party in Bengal He also helped in organising the student and peasant movements in Bengal He was President of the All-India Moslem Students' Conference in 1937

Author of various books, he has carried the same progressive and radical tendencies into literature He conducts *Chaturanga* a well-known quarterly magazine in Bengali, is himself an able writer of short stories, a poet of sensitiveness and a literary critic of front rank

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This monograph marks an attempt to present within a short compass some of the salient features of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's work. Chatterjee occupied in Bengali literature a position that is almost unique and yet he is not as wellknown outside the limits of Bengal as he deserves. In recent years, there have been translations of some of his works into Hindusthani and other Indian languages. A few English versions have also appeared, but these hardly convey to the reader the tremendous influence which Chatterjee's work exercised over the Bengali mind. One may go further and say that the non-Bengalee reader can perhaps never fully realise the extent and depth of such influence. Even when he is aware that such influence exists, he finds it difficult to fully understand or appreciate it.

This may at first sound somewhat paradoxical but it is a paradox which is capable of resolution. The present work attempts that task through a presentation of the

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social background in which Chatterjee worked. The failure to correlate the writer with his environment prevents a proper appreciation of his work. In the case of Chatterjee, such failure makes any appraisal of his achievement altogether impossible. That the non-Bengalee reader sometimes feels a little puzzled over our excitement about Chatterjee cannot be denied. He feels the force and beauty of much of the writing and can admire equally with us the craftsmanship and technique in the construction of the stories. Nevertheless, he tends to feel that our enthusiasm for Chatterjee is too exuberant and loud and attributes it to a lack of solidity in the Bengalee temperament. The Bengalee on the other hand feels that the excellence of Chatterjee is self-evident and any failure to pay him his due meed of praise only betokens a deficiency in aesthetic sense. A concentration on these differences in judgment helps us to understand the peculiar character of Chatterjee's genius, and also explains the fascination he exercises over the Bengali mind. There may or may not have been greater or more profound writers in Bengal, but assuredly there has never been

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another who was more beloved by the people

The secret of Chatterjee's appeal for the Bengalee mind is his essentially Bengalee character. This does not imply any dogmatism about blood or race, but only points to the undoubted fact that the combination of historical and geographical factors gives to people of the same locality and period a recognisable identity which distinguishes them from people of other spatio-temporal contexts. Such historical and geographical factors include not only blood and race, but also economic, political and other social institutions which act and react upon one another in an unending series. The result of these interacting influences reveals itself in what is loosely described as racial character, though it is clear that the same ingredients, though perhaps with differences in emphasis and combination, must be present in the composition of all human beings. It was because Chatterjee belonged to the norm or type of the Bengalee character that he is so dear to the people of Bengal.

This is especially true of his writings of the middle period. His earliest work bears

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not only the marks of apprenticeship, but also an exuberant emotionalism that is incompatible with the serenity and poise of the artist. This contributed to his quick and extensive popularity, but at the cost of aesthetic excellence. It warmed the hearts of his readers but hindered the complete aesthetic exploitation of his material. In his latest work, he was often carried away by the rush of new ideas with which he was imperfectly familiar. A strong purposive note is present in all his writing, but in the later novels, this note becomes shrill and dominant. He allowed the claims of propaganda to override those of art. One reason for this was that the minds of men moved towards the idea of a new social order in which the frustrations of the old world vanish. Since the impact of the last Great War, there has been a quickening in Indian consciousness. The giant movement of Mahatma Gandhi combined Muslim and Hindu in a militant brotherhood and stirred the stagnant waters of Indian quietitude. No doubt, thereafter, reaction set in and there were instances of lapse and throwback to a disappearing past. But over India as a whole, the non-co-operation movement

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and the Khulafat agitation have left permanent marks. They were like a tidal wave in which the water recede after a while, but the alterations in the landmarks remain. Chatterjee had thrown himself into the movement and the ferment left permanent marks on his work. He felt the appeal of these new ideas, but he was content to feel them vaguely. To comprehend in imagination all their significance and implication required an effort which he was too indolent to make. His works of maturity carry on them the stamp of truth. The characters live, for they are the men and women among whom he lived and suffered. They are not constructions according to some preconceived plan but creations who are born out of the marriage of imagination and experience.

The work of Chatterjee's maturity offers us a cross-section of Bengalee society. The normal men and women who constitute the backbone of the community are there but side by side with them we find the waifs and strays who hover on the fringes of conventional life. The narrow and circumscribed life of a member of the middle classes is portrayed with ruthless accuracy.

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but the innate kindliness that softens the sharp struggle for existence is also not lost. The strange alternation of cruelty and sentimentality in the individual is balanced against the combination of social indifference and tyranny. Nothing escapes Chatterjee's eyes, for in these works of his maturity, he is a seer who records with matchless fidelity the various forms of social life. No extraneous purpose interferes with his aims. The characters glow with the vitality of abundant life and endow the setting and background with abiding truth. Their social significance is immediate, not derivative.

The unity with the life of the province explains why Chatterjee is perhaps the best beloved writer of Bengal. It also explains why readers from other regions find his appeal for the people of Bengal somewhat strange and surprising. Men and women of Bengal share in the characteristics common to all humanity and hence Chatterjee's work has a universal appeal. Men and women of Bengal share certain characteristics which distinguish them from all other human beings and hence men of a different country or race

find it difficult to understand the significance of Chatterjee to the Bengalee reader.]

Chatterjee is, however, preeminently a story-teller. His plots are often simple and he has not disdained to repeat old themes. He is also at times lax in characterisation and is content to suggest one or two prominent features to fix the character in our memory. We even find that he has sometimes used the same or similar character under different names. At times he shows a tendency towards describing the type rather than create the individual. These are serious charges against an artist who claims a place in the first rank and they have all been made — with more or less justice — against Chatterjee. One charge, however, has never been made against him and in fact cannot be made. [He is a raconteur par excellence and the ease and flow of his narrative makes us forget all flaws in the plots and weaknesses in the characterisation.] His stories sweep on like a torrent at full spate and we are swept along in breathless suspense.

This gift of narrative was reinforced by Chatterjee's deep social sympathies. The struggles of his early life made him dis-

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card conventional standards. He had found exquisite goodness in the most unexpected quarters. Social respectability was on the other hand often a mere cloak for inner decay and dessication. Chatterjee sought to penetrate behind mere externals and look into men for their intrinsic worth. His sympathies were wide and early experience taught him that an attitude of criticism or superciliousness did not give access to the secret places of the heart. Fellow feeling could be achieved only through imagination and sympathy. All Chatterjee's work is informed by this deep and wide sympathy with life. All men were to him brothers and literally. He did not try to judge or reform them. It was enough for him if he could love them and win their love. He not only won their love but also gained an understanding and insight that were of inestimable value to his art. To unequalled powers of narration were added the gift of an almost unlimited love and sympathy for human life in all its forms.

Chatterjee is and will remain the national writer of Bengal. This makes it the more necessary why others more

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especially Indians living in other provinces and speaking other languages, must try to understand him. Men of Bengal must seek also to interpret him to others so that through understanding him they may also understand the life and mind of Bengal. Chatterjee fought all his life against the tyranny of foreign domination. Today the whole of India is charged with the same spirit. It is perhaps proper that this attempt to interpret his work to a wider public should appear at a time when the questions of freedom and domination are exercising the minds of men throughout India and the world. When Yusuf Meherally suggested that I should attempt such interpretation, I readily undertook the task. This monograph was accordingly prepared. That was about two years ago, but Meherally's sudden arrest prevented its appearance at the time. The manuscript remained with him and during his brief interval of liberty, he completed the arrangements for its publication. Before it could actually appear, the prison gates have again closed on him.

HUMAYUN KABIR

November, 1942

SARAT CHANDRA CHATTERJEE

CHAPTER I

It is perhaps not without significance that the birth of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee in the last quarter of the nineteenth century preceded by hardly a decade the birth of the Indian National Congress. The collapse of Indian political life after the great struggle of 1857 was slowly fading from the public consciousness. The infiltration of Western ideas and culture disturbed the complacency of age-long conservatism while the slow emergence of a well-off and leisured class shaped an instrument for adventure into new social and political forms. The increasing poverty and squalor in the villages combined with improving means of communication not only compelled a growing exodus to the towns but also helped a rapid circulation of ideas. Brave young hearts dreamt of political liberty and social reform. A quickening of consciousness was in the air and the new aspirations of the Indian people sought an organ of expression in the Indian National Congress.

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee was barely ten at the time and could hardly have taken any interest in the event. But he came from the Hindu middle class of Bengal which was the first major social group in India to respond to the demands of the new age. Moreover, his early childhood was passed outside Bengal proper, in Bhagalpur, though it was politically within Bengal at the time. Even if this be denied by protagonists of Greater Bengal there is no denying that Bhagalpur is at best a border line case. Emigrants and people on the frontier are invariably more conscious of their racial and linguistic integrity than those who live in the heart of a country. For justifying this consciousness, such people are also more alive to their function in the social economy. The metier of the Bengalee middle-class was the political regeneration of the country. They felt themselves to be the pioneers of the movement for national liberation. This feeling would naturally burn stronger in the border lands, and it is not accidental that many of the early leaders of political thought in the province came from the outlying districts. A child of a middle class family of Bhagalpur

his attachment to the social pattern of his group. Emigrant societies are generally exclusive and touchy about their customs and beliefs. People at the frontier often cling more and more tenaciously to conventions. The British colonist dressing for dinner in his solitary cabin in a wild forest is only an extreme example of this tendency. But, Chatterjee was not an average man. In his sensitive and wide awake mind, the variety of social patterns induced an attitude of toleration tinged with scepticism. It widened his sympathies and enlarged his imagination. More than that, it made him responsive to the slightest variations in social conformity and made him keenly conscious of the significance of social forms.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Chatterjee should be a rebel from the days of his adolescence. This revolutionary quality characterises not only his literary work but even his life. The traditions of his family and his social environment pointed unmistakably towards a steady, if not brilliant scholastic life, and thereafter a comfortable living in one of the recognised professions of the day. But

would, therefore, normally develop a keen social and political sense. And when the child was one so alert and sensitive as Chatterjee, this development was almost inevitable.

Thus a profound social and political consciousness distinguishes Chatterjee from most of the other novelists of Bengal. It burns in them as well, but in many of them it burns faintly and fitfully. In one sense, every artist must have a social conscience, for he would not otherwise be an artist. With many writers, this social conscience is assumed without question. It is a part of their mental make-up, and consequently never an object of their conscious artistic endeavour. With Chatterjee, this social conscience constitutes the essential element and purpose of his art. Chatterjee's early life in one of the border districts of Bengal had perhaps something to do with this conscious concern with social conscience. Different types of social life impinge at the frontier. Easy acceptance of any particular social pattern is more difficult in such a context. The average man often reacts a negative way to these circumstances and exaggerates

Chatterjee was temperamentally unfitted for such a conventional life. A quite promising student, he suddenly shifted his interest from the study of books to the study of life. The result was a varied and curious experience which revealed to him many aspects of life of which a person of his age or social group was generally unaware. Some of them have been immortalised in his later works. What Chatterjee lost in social esteem, he gained in the raw materials of his art.

A period of experimental stories followed and Chatterjee achieved a local reputation. Recognition seemed near when one of his stories won the first prize on the results of an All-Bengal competition in which many of the most well-known writers of the time had participated. Characteristically enough, Chatterjee had sent his story under a pseudonym and except, a few friends, nobody knew his secret. As if afraid of the success he had achieved, he suddenly disappeared from Bengal. For almost a decade he lived in Burma,—incognito. The fate of the average Bengalee of the middle class had, it seemed at last overtaken him. He was a clerk

in an office, drawing a fixed salary and living an apparently respectable and conventional life

Rebellion was, however, in his blood, and the submission to convention was only apparent. The fluid social conditions of life in Burma fitted well with his adventurous character, and afforded him opportunities of insight into the Indian mind as were perhaps nowhere else possible. Burma was at the time a seething cauldron of Indian life. Every province and every social type was represented there. Persons who in India were far removed in space, time and beliefs were suddenly thrown together and compelled to enter into a common corporate life. And they came not as social groups, nor even as representatives (like the British colonist) of such groups. They came as individuals cutting loose from society. In many cases, they really were adrift and without any social bonds. Removed from the inhibitions of a familiar social environment they were thrown back upon their own instincts and temperament. A new type of loose and free social order developed in which the assertion of individuality at times went to grotesque lengths.

In *Shrikanta* — perhaps Chatterjee's finest work — there is a description of Indian humanity travelling as deck passengers to Rangoon. Men and women from rural as well as urban Bengal rub shoulders with men from the farthest frontier. The artisan from Orissa and the small trader from Sind, the labourer from Andhra and the merchant from Rajputana are all there. In effect, the hold of the boat is an epitome of the Indian world. When they board the boat at Calcutta, each group and individual marks out a living space for itself — an area sharply bounded off from the welter of humanity outside the limit. From these narrow and exclusive worlds they watch one another and even enter into relations of formal friendships. The concentrated essence of India — the India of religious, communal, linguistic, provincial and customary difference — sets out on the voyage. Before the voyage is over, all this has changed. The artificial barriers that the travellers have set up are smashed beyond repair. A cyclone bursts upon the ship and churns into an indistinguishable welter the different social types and individuals who had entered into the hold. The man from

Andhra is literally thrown into the arms of the frontier's man. The Bengalee is inextricably mixed up with the merchant from Rajputana. After the storm is over, they attempt to sort themselves out once more. They return to their previous demarcations and occupy their respective living spaces. They even attempt to restore the formal relations obtaining before. A semblance of traditional Indian life is recreated, but they all feel that it is only a semblance. The storm has smashed through their former prejudices and at least as long as they live in Burma, the old social beliefs have little hold on them.

The scene in the hold of the ship was characteristic of Indian life in Burma as Chatterjee knew it. With his wide sympathies and acute social consciousness, he derived from it not only knowledge of, but love for, different Indian social types. Childhood in a border town had loosened his prejudices and widened his imagination. The experience of youth in Burma confirmed his liberalism and convinced him of the irrelevance of conventional standards in judging the worth of a human being. Caste and touchability constituted

till very recently the core of Hindu society. Some may say that they do so even today. Caste and touchability are based on the taboo to inter-dining and inter-marriage. Indian society in Burma, or at least a great part of it, was growing up on the denial of both the taboos. In *Pather Dabi* (Right of Way) Chatterjee tells us of a Burmese family of which the eldest daughter has married a Moslem from Madras, the second an Indo-Portuguese of Chittagong, the third an Anglo-Indian and the fourth a domiciled Chinaman. Nor, is this an exceptional case. The heroine of the story Mary Bharati, is the daughter of a Bengalee Brahmin, who with his wife and daughter accepts Christianity. After his death, his widow marries an Anglo-Indian from Bangalore and emigrates to Rangoon.

Such dissolution of social beliefs and customs may lead to an utter anarchy of individualism. With many of the emigrants, this was actually the case. They discarded the patterns of social behaviours to which they were accustomed at home, but built up in its place no new uniformity of conduct. The result was a relapse to

a social atmosphere of which selfishness and sensual pleasure were the dominant elements. Libertinism and sexual promiscuity of every type was the order rather than the exception. Double standards of life and morality were maintained side by side. The emigrant looked forward to the day when he would return home and resume the social conventions he had left behind. In the meantime, his only objective was pleasure unhampered by any moral considerations. In *Shrikanta*, Chatterjee paints a scathing picture of such moral hypocrisy. An emigrant of Bengal, after many years of life in Burma, is returning home. He had entered into marital relations with a Burmese woman—temporary and with mental qualifications on his side but accepted as a sincere and permanent union by the woman. He is now leaving Burma for good, but she does not know it. He represents to her that he is suddenly called home, and will return as soon as he has finished his business there. With their children, she has come to see him off. Mock tears stream down his cheek and in a voice of lament, he pretends to bewail the temporary separation. In fact he is laughing at her

with his friends. With the shamelessness of a libertine planning to reform, he is mocking her for her sorrow.

Chatterjee saw the naked and unabashed selfishness of the individual cut off from his social moorings. But he also saw how wonderful and varied are the workings of the human heart, once the dull uniformity of social conventions is removed. It deepened his experience and increased his acquaintance with human nature in the raw. In the life of the average man in society, conventions take the place of beliefs. Habits enervate the real feelings so that we rarely get at his inmost heart. Both his virtue and his vice are conventional stereotyped patterns of response imposed upon his individual genius. His conduct, therefore, exhibits all the externals of morality, but lacks the creative self-expression which is its essence. His morality and immorality were both real, not a mere habit. From this point of view, his sojourn in Burma was for Chatterjee an unmitigated gain. There was little risk that the anti-social anarchy should affect his mind. From his earliest days, a deep and conscious

social conscience had dominated his life. The only result of his invaluable experience in Burma was a heightening of this consciousness.

Chatterjee spent almost a decade in Burma. He had left some of his stories with friends, and in his absence and without his knowledge, *Bara Did* was published anonymously in three instalments. It created a mild stir and many people attributed it to Rabindranath Tagore. There is an amusing story about its publication. Tagore was at the time editing a journal himself. On the appearance of the first instalment of the novel, his manager appeared in a huff and protested that it was hardly fair that Tagore should write a new novel and all unknown to him, send it to a rival magazine. It was with difficulty he accepted the disclaimers of the astonished Tagore. He argued that it was hardly possible that there should be another writer in Bengal, and unknown at that, capable of writing such a story. The incident was duly reported to Chatterjee, and he enjoyed it more for its humour than for its flattering reference to him.

SARAT CHANDRA CHATTERJEE

For five years after the publication of *Bara Didi* nothing more was heard of Chatterjee. The general public enjoyed the story but were not appreciably moved. Discriminating critics saw its promise and welcomed the writer as a new and rising force. There was at first disappointment that no more of his work should appear, but with the passage of time, curiosity about his work gradually disappeared. Chatterjee slowly faded out of the public consciousness.

Then something wonderful happened. Chatterjee stormed the public consciousness with a succession of stories any one of which was enough to establish the reputation of a writer. *Bindur Chhele*, *Ramer Sumati*, *Biraj Bahu* and *Charitraheen*,—a series of masterpieces followed in quick succession that at first startled and then enchanted Bengal. It was as if a meteor shot through the firmament and illuminated with its fire-work the literary sky of Bengal. The nuances of a child's emotion, the secret passions of disillusioned minds or the cross-currents in the social life of rural and urban Bengal were all expressed with a sympathy and vividness that had never been equalled before.

The way this literary miracle happened was characteristic of Chatterjee. About five years after the publication of *Bara Didi*, he suddenly returned to Bengal. He asked one of his friends to read out the story to him and seemed astonished that he had ever written it. He was obviously deeply moved and at last said that he had done wrong in giving up writing. The story was good, definitely good, but he doubted if he could write as well any more. In any case, he would like to try again, but he had many dependants and his only stay was the salary of his post in Burma. His friends pressed him to return. They would assure him the miserable hundred rupees he earned by his job and yet Chatterjee hesitated. Supposing *Bara Didi* had been a fluke; he said, he would try again and in three months he had written almost a quarter of his *Charitraheen*, perhaps after *Shrikanta*, the work with which his name is most associated in the public mind.

Chatterjee returned to Bengal. There followed the marvellous period in which in quick succession he threw off works that not only established his reputation but

also won him the love and admiration of his people. But Chatterjee never lost his artistic humility. Much later, when his position in Bengali literature was assured and people thought of the possibility of International honours for him, he expressed the same diffidence about his work. He was frankly surprised when told of the success a French translation of his *Shrikanta* had achieved. What could they find to admire in it, he wondered!

Now began the real literary life of Chatterjee. He threw himself into artistic creation with a single-minded energy that has rarely been equalled. Even in this adoption of literature as a profession, there was a suggestion of revolutionary quality. Till now the writers of Bengal had all been amateurs. With some, literature was a diversion, for others, a vocation. Madhusudan Dutt, the first great figure of modern Bengali literature, looked to teaching of law for his livelihood and wrote his poetry as a recreation. Bankim Chatterjee earned his living by a Government official and wrote his novels in his leisure hours. Tagore, fortunate in the inheritance of genius and wealth, was

never required to work for a living and made of literature a vocation to which he devoted all his gifts. But with Chatterjee it was otherwise. His salary had been his only standby and now it was to literature he had to look for his fame as well as his sustenance.

There had been professional journalists before him and yet Chatterjee is perhaps the first professional writer of Bengal. It was his job, not a mere hobby. Journalists had written to order on matters of topical interest. It was almost a tradition that work for or with a view to payment can never be art. Art is something pure and unsullied. Contact with the marketplace destroys its essence and makes of it mere journalesque. One corollary of this isolation of art from the rude demands of life was a restriction of the subject matter of art. Hunger, food and the means of livelihood were matters too mundane for art. They were disqualified as either the content of, or the impulse to artistic creation. By a natural extension of such æstheticism, sex, love and passion were equally taboo. A prim and narrow morality governed the attitude of most of the writers of the time.

The adoption of literature as a profession was, therefore, revolutionary in a double sense. It not only destroyed the barriers between art and life and brought down literature to the market-place, it also extended the limits of art by bringing into its purview elements that were formerly literary untouchables. Dependence on the common man forces the literary artist to think about him more. The concern with the loves and hates, joys and sorrows of the average man in the writings of Chatterjee and his followers is, therefore, not an accident. It is part of the democratic revolution,—one may link it up with the slow development of capitalism and the emergence of a middle class,—by which literature was becoming dependent on a widening public rather than on a select coterie.

The remaining years of Chatterjee's life can be described briefly. Success brought him not only fame and recognition, but also security and wealth. He was not, however, the type that would be content with security. He continually sought for new modes of expression of his personality. He experimented not only with his literary

art, but also with his life. And these experiments would not let him forget that most of the evils of life are the results of social mal-adjustments. Behind social mal-adjustments lie political and economic wrongs. It was inevitable that the revolutionary in Chatterjee should rebel against them and seek to bring a new order into existence. The literary artist in him did not forget his dreams when he threw himself into the political whirlpool to translate them into facts. In the Non-co operation Movement of 1921 and the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 Chatterjee gave practical demonstration of his faith.

The collapse of the political movement of 1932 made Chatterjee examine once more the pre-suppositions of his beliefs. The note of rebellion in his writing becomes intensified. Some would say that it becomes shrill in its intensity. The sense of revolutionary changes in religion and politics, society and morals overwhelms him. Perhaps the ideas are not completely assimilated by him. Perhaps a destructive mania must precede all large-scale reconstruction. In any case, his last

works hover between uncertainties. A militant acceptance of the new alternates with regret for what must vanish. Attachment to the society in which he was born takes on a new poignancy but at times it also interferes with his artistic vision. Before he could re-establish an equilibrium between the all-comprehensive demands of a new outlook and the lingering fondness for some aspects of a decaying society, death cut short his life.

CHAPTER II

It was his social consciousness that Chatterjee revolutionary. He saw utter depravity to which a man can once the social inhibitions are removed. The absence of social bonds does however, exaggerate his selfishness. It also enhances and deepens the element of nobility in him. Society, then, acts as a sort of brake that controls good and evil in man. But the control exercises is only superficial. Other a removal or even relaxation of the control would not result in such wild orgies witnessed in his Burma life. The mechanical imposition of habits is, therefore, not enough. Society, if its sanction is to be of any real value, must be in human nature and not merely contrived. Nor is there any reason why it should be so. If society is really evolved for common good, its sanctions should be binding on the individual for his own sake. All compulsion should in such case be of place. Why then is it that in absence of compulsion, man sheds

social bonds like an unwelcome encumbrance ?

Concern with this question made Chatterjee realise that whatever may have been the case in the past, Indian society today represents an ossification of vested interests. His attention was focussed on Hindu society but with minor variations, it is true of other societies as well. Arbitrary standards have been imposed for the maintenance of the *status quo*. Preservation of vested interests masquerades as the preservation of order and peace. Even morality and religion are more often than not instruments for the exploitation of one class by another. Hence, the social concepts of good and evil are tainted at the very source, and are worse than inadequate for judging the worth of a human being.

It did not, however, escape Chatterjee's notice that even the most lifeless of social controls has a certain efficacy in mitigating the lesser evils of life. Society curbs the free expression of personality and, therefore, the best in man often distorted by social inhibitions. Excess of evil on the other hand bursts as under the restric-

tions it imposes and contaminates the social values themselves. Between these extremes, there is a range of human activities that are not remarkable for either good or evil. They lack the energy which gives uniqueness and distinction to experience and yet they serve as counters in common social life. In the absence of accepted social patterns, they become wild. Lacking in the energy that can justify even wildness, they become merely petty and pointless. Like the impotent rage of a cripple or the lasciviousness of a decrepit rake.

In spite of his revolutionary ardour, there is in Chatterjee an element of conservatism that has often surprised people. This is specially noticeable in his delineation of woman. Many of his heroines have violated the social code. Some of them have an intellectual resilience that is amazing. In spite of their social and intellectual emancipation, they often reveal a regard even for traditions that have little vitality or value. Raj Lakshmi in his *Shrikanta* is what one would call a fallen woman. She was a childhood love of Shrikanta. He meets her after many

years amongst a landlord's retinue She is Raj Lakshmi no more, but Peary Baiji, a singer and dancer whose profession is held in disrepute in India That she should in spite of her experiences retain her innate purity does not surprise us But it does surprise us when we find that she attempts to imitate and follow the rituals and formalities of an orthodox Hindu widow

This can be variously explained One explanation would be that by a law of psychological compensation, Raj Lakshmi's strict adherence to the formalities of religion is an attempt to atone for her past It is well known that amongst rakes and prostitutes, many are extremely superstitious The asperity and militant faith of reformed sinners and sceptics have always attracted attention But such an explanation shows a total misunderstanding of Raj Lakshmi's character For the point of Chatterjee's delineation is that though the world may regard her as a fallen woman she has never lost her innate purity Only a tainted woman can try to compensate for her fall by ascetic rigours

The same thing holds good of Annada Didi in *Shrikanta* or Sabitri in *Charitraheen*. They are all victims of social injustice, sometimes social rebels but never social culprits and always exquisite specimens of pure womanhood. Their adherence to meaningless social conventions and superstitions cannot be explained on the theory of expiation for past mistakes. That this is so becomes clearer when we think of other characters to whom such social stigma does not attach at all. Bharati in *Pather Dabi*, Kamal in *Sesh Prashna* or Bandana in *Bipra Das* come from a different social level. They are educated and cultured and they have no past. They are intelligent, even intellectual and critical of some of the fundamental assumptions of society. In spite of all their emancipation, they cannot, however, transcend the conventions and prejudices of orthodox Hindu society. Bharati, brought up as a Christian in an Anglo-Indian family adopts not only the dress but also the manner and conventions of an orthodox Hindu girl. Bandana with all her modern education and enlightenment is continually trying to cast herself into ancient moulds. Strangest of all,

Kamal—whom Chatterjee has visualised as a merciless antagonist of accepted institutions and beliefs contradicts her professions in her practice. A defender of freedom in love and pioneer of the society of the future,—in the opinion of many a mere bundle of modernist speeches, she is most unmodern in her uncritical acceptance of the spiritual values of vegetarianism !

The lingering conservatism of Chatterjee must, therefore, be explained on some hypothesis other than a hankering after respectability. What has been said of his experiences in Burma perhaps supplies a clue to the real explanation. If the absence of social control exaggerates both the evil and the good in man, is not such control desirable for the average man ? Passion, as Stevenson said, is like a lion and hardly suited for domesticity. The genius may similarly find himself hampered by the inhibitions of society. But the majority of men neither are nor desire to be lions. They seek comfort rather than happiness, domesticity rather than the wildness of passion. That the longing for domesticity and comfort should be

stronger in women than in men is not surprising. For one thing, women suffer more from the dissolution of social bonds than men. For another, man is by nature less social and more self-centred than the woman. In fact, there may be a biological reason for it. The function of the male in the continuity of the species is casual and transient. After the temporary urge of passion has been satisfied, he is often indifferent to its social results. With the woman it is otherwise. Her passion is not satisfied by sex alone but demands its fruition in motherhood. Paternity is for the male an accident. For the female maternity is as important as sex. Chatterjee's men are eccentric and egocentric, while normality and tenderness generally characterise his women. In the relations between them there is always an element of motherly solicitude. More often than not, Chatterjee's heroines love their heroes with almost a motherly love. Women constitute the cement of society; men are at best its bricks and stones.

This perception of the innate conservatism of women is therefore, a result of Chatterjee's heightened social consciousness.

ness Two other factors are, however, responsible for strengthening it The law of psychological compensation cannot, in the form of expiation for past sins adequately account for the element of conservatism in Chatterjee But once direct contact with human life in the raw had engendered in his mind the germ of conservatism, it is a factor that helps its growth It operates in a way that is quite common and can be illustrated from other fields of life Those who commit great crimes often hesitate before minor ones We often try to please in small matters those whom we have greatly offended Logically there may be little justification for this Small courtesies of life to a deadly enemy may even be a sign of weakness of mind It may be more politic to utterly crush those whom we have once injured Nevertheless, it is a fact that in actual life we do try to make up in little ways for our great wrongs Utter ruthlessness is as rare as absolute altruism Man illogically plods along with his curious inconsistencies in conduct Chatterjee's heroines behave illogically for the same reason Perhaps, they feel that having questioned the fundamental assumptions

of morality, they can afford to conform in matters of small moment

The other factor which contributes to Chatterjee's conservatism is not an expression of the inconsistencies of the human mind, but is directly related to his revolutionary ardour. It is derived from his political consciousness, his desire to burst the shackles that impose upon the Indian mind. This may sound paradoxical but such paradoxes are common in any human society, and increase with the growth of restrictions upon the freedom of the mind. In a politically subject country, patriotism is easily confused with adherence to old prejudices. Love of country often assumes the form of love for its superstitions. Renaissance imperceptibly merges into revivalism. Chatterjee's love for the country and his sense of the political wrongs underlying her social ills perhaps make him an unconscious defender of existing customs and beliefs. His conscious mind rebels against the superstition and prejudices that restricted the free expression of personality. He saw in them social counterparts of the political bondage. He also believed that the

undermining of conservatism in any one field helps the forces of progress in other fields. Nevertheless, his unconscious mind could not reject these inheritances outright. They had little intrinsic value but their derivative worth to him was great. They were dear to him just because they were a part of the social consciousness of the people he loved.

This love of old forms has been responsible for a certain weakness in Chatterjee's art, but as we shall soon see, it is not an unmitigated loss. He at times allows his pity and attachment to the social forms of Bengal to deny the findings of his artistic insight. Roma's love for Ramesh in *Palli Samaj* must end in frustration, for she is a widow and the conservative society of Bengal does not recognise a widow's right to love. Sabitri's love for Satish in *Chraritraheen* is wasted in exactly the same manner and for exactly the same reasons. Kironmoyee in the same book, one of Chatterjee's most intelligent and intellectual women, rebels against the inhibitions of society. Her revolt fails and her longing for love remains unfulfilled. In the sequel, her marvellous intellect

destroys itself and she ends in lunacy. In *Shrikanta*, Raj Lakshmi loves Shrikanta with all her heart but she cannot surrender herself to him. For, is she not a widow and a fallen woman? She no doubt tries to rationalise her reluctance to consummate her love, but can it be denied that her hesitation and timidity are the results of traditional inhibitions?

Revolutionary urge and conservative throw-back are, therefore, inextricably mixed up in Chatterjee's character and work. This conflict dominates his writings and herein lies their peculiar interest for us. For, we all share in the same conflicts and uncertainties. We are tired of old forms and conventions and seek to reject them utterly. But even at the moment of attack, there is in us an element that hesitates. We seek to reject old values, but they have entered into the very essence of our beings. In rejecting them, we seem to be vivisectioning our own personality. The urgencies of our needs demand newer and newer experiments but the experiments themselves carry in them an element of tradition.

Various names have been given to this

conflict in man The conflict between tradition and experiment, between revolutionary urge and conservative throw-back, between youth and age, all seek to express the fundamental fact that man lives in two dimensions of time All his action is teleological and he is a denizen of the future The demands of life drive him forward and he seeks to translate into facts the dreams of his heart But the moment he attempts to do so, his past reasserts itself The conventions and beliefs, habits and assumptions of experience bind him with iron chains and make him a prisoner of the past The quick and eager adventurer of tomorrow is weighed down with the heavy burden of all his yesterdays This conflict is the quintessence of his life and experience His present is only the focus where past and future meet

Shrikanta is Chatterjee's greatest work because it expresses this conflict in the purest form The problem is posed at the very beginning of the book Indra Nath, young social and vital represents the natural instincts of man his urge to move forward in accordance with the demands of life He does not reject social conven-

tions, they simply do not exist for him. Morality is, however, a social concept and precisely because of this, his actions are never immoral. He does whatever his instincts prompt and is altogether unconscious of their moral implications. They are expressions of his spontaneity and amoral like the action of a nymph or faun. Shrikanta's first contact with Indra Nath both shocks and astonishes him, perhaps also delights him in his inmost heart, for where is the human individual who does not secretly long to escape conventions and responsibility, to be just himself, if unburdened by the weight of traditions and beliefs?

In a fracas at the end of a football match where young Shrikanta finds himself surrounded by assailants, Indra Nath makes his first appearance. Indra Nath rescues him and coolly offers him intoxicant, leaves to chew. Indra Nath hardly notices his surprised refusal and offers him a cigar instead. Shrikanta is scandalised and afraid, and asks what would happen if any body saw him smoke. With a casual remark that it did not matter, Indra Nath lights the refused cigar and walks away through the crowded street. The per-

plexed Shrikanta cannot even decide which feeling is stronger in his mind on this first occasion of his meeting Indra Nath, admiration for his boldness or condemnation for smoking in public ?

Every time Shrikanta meets Indra Nath, he is swept away by his vital urgency. When Indra Nath is not there, traditions and conventions warn him against this surrender to a social naturalism. Worldly wisdom and the cult of respectability point the way towards a conventional life. There lies comfort and security and ease. But Indra Nath represents the call of the wild and the dangerous and the wanderer in Shrikanta cannot resist his appeal. One evening he meets Indra Nath who invites him to come out fishing with him. He cannot refuse and the experience remains memorable all his life. Dark night and mighty river and the irresistible wind all combine to give him a vision of the wild majesty and beauty of nature that permanently changes the tenor of his life.

Tradition, it seems, has lost the battle and henceforth Shrikanta's life will be dominated by the urgency of natural instincts. The conflict of instinct and

tradition is, however, perennial and Annada Didi appears on the scene to rescue Shrikanta from Indra Nath's fate. She represents the forces of tradition as Indra Nath does those of the instincts. In her, the faith of the past has extinguished all desires of life. Just as Indra Nath lives in the future, she lives in the past. Her present is dark and her future darker. Society condemns her for her supposed lapse. But she knows that even at the cost of her reputation, she has been true to her traditions. Her life is a continual sacrifice to her ideal of chastity.

Indra Nath and Annada Didi represent, so far as is humanly possible, pure instinct and pure tradition. Human nature is, however, complex and there must be the admixture of both in man. That is perhaps one reason why we soon lose sight of both of them. Chatterjee instinctively feels that if they live longer, they must cease being representatives of a pure quality of life. A vignette might express them as principles governing life, but a full-length portrait must paint them as men and women of flesh and blood. Annada Didi must, therefore, die before the story is old.

India Nath fades away, for he is her complement. With her disappearance, he also must dissolve into the elements.

The influence of Indra Nath and Annada Didi, however, remains. The conflict of tradition and experiment reveals itself as the guiding principle of the novel. The life of Shrikanta and Raj Lakshmi and their relations to one another are instinct with this conflict. Some times tradition wins and some times the urgency of life. Shrikanta becomes a wanderer and Raj Lakshmi a professional singer. The ties of family life and the bond of convention cannot repress their spontaneity. But the victory of Indra Nath is never complete. Love and the instincts again and again bring Shrikanta and Raj Lakshmi near one another. They cannot however break the inhibitions of prejudice and social custom. Their love remains unfulfilled and torn in the bipolarity of attraction and repulsion. Annada Didi a representative and victim of tradition triumphs. Perhaps Aboya, another character in *Shrikanta*, is the only daughter of Chatterjee who breaks completely free from the dead hand of the past.

CHAPTER III

His social consciousness made Chatterjee not only a revolutionary, but also a deeply purposive writer. In fact, an element of purpose is present in almost all his writings. This was made inevitable by his revolutionary urge, but even his conservatism contributes to the same end. In fact, his conservatism performs an important function in the economy of his art. Mere desire for reform is not enough to make an artist, nor blind adherence to existing ideals. On the contrary, either of these may reduce art to mere propaganda. Blind condemnation of the old, and wild appeal for the new may themselves become conventions. Surrender to such conventions marks the end of art, just as much as uncritical acquiescence to effect traditions. The peculiar quality of Chatterjee's conservatism rescues his art from degenerating into mere polemic. It was the ballast that steadied him on his artistic voyage.

A contrast of Chatterjee with two of his greatest predecessors is both interesting

and fruitful Bankim Chatterjee is universally recognised as the creator of the modern Bengali novel. In addition, many people claim for him greatness as a novelist. The pioneer's credit is certainly his, but his worth as an artist is more open to question. That he was a good novelist nobody can deny, but whether he was a great novelist may be doubted. For one thing he lacks in artistic detachment and surrenders his judgment to the socio-religious prejudices of the day. In Aristotelian terms, he imitated not nature, but the contemporary conception of life. This explains his immediate and immense popularity. It also explains why he has dated so rapidly and is hardly read today.

Bankim Chatterjee regarded himself as a purposive writer. But, his purpose was definite and, therefore, narrow. It was the conventional morality of the day and he made himself its preacher and apologist. His lack of artistic detachment made him view the characters who transgressed his conception of morality with almost a personal pique. They are painted black and almost without any redeeming features. When they are good, again accord-

ing to his ideas, they are almost unbelievably good. Punishment of the evil, reward of the virtuous and justification of the ways of God were the principles that governed his outlook on life.

This narrow moralism has harmed Bankim Chatterjee's art in two ways. On the one hand, it has made his conception of character unreal by applying to it a mechanical formula. Those who fit into the formula are accepted, others rejected. How mechanical the formula is, would be best illustrated by pointing to his treatment of Rohini in *Krishna Kanter Will*. Rohini is beautiful, intelligent and possessed of a kind heart. A child widow, she has never known love and longs for it but in an honourable way. When there seems no prospect of love with honour she tries to drown herself. Then she meets Gobindlal and leaves her home with him. Bankim Chatterjee never suggests that she did not leave her home for love but once she has done so she is in his eyes a fallen woman. Fallen beyond redemption. All her former grace and charm are forgotten and she is painted as a harlot. A fine and sensitive character may degenerate into a

whole, but the degeneration must be explained. For Bankim Chatterjee, no explanation is necessary. One who has transgressed the social code is capable of any enormity. She must be punished for her crimes and debased before she is punished. Bankim Chatterjee cannot stop till he has killed Rohini.

This mechanical conception of character makes of his heroes and heroines mere types. Useful for the preacher and the propagandist, they have little value in art. That is why his characters never stir us deeply. Even where we admire them, we admire them from afar. But this mechanical conception of character is itself the result of a rigid outlook on society. Here we come across the second factor responsible for the degeneration of his art. To justify the ways of God before men is eminently desirable but the difficulty is that we cannot always be sure of God's purposes. Bankim Chatterjee saw such purposes in the social conventions that he inherited and accepted without question. Tradition was sacred to him because of its antiquity. God speaks to men with ancient voice. Bankim Chatterjee was,

therefore, incapable of seeing that the antique can decay. Living forms that express the play of life become ossified in time and must either be ended or mended by taking what is ephemeral and changeful as permanent and unchanging, he binds himself to the eternal variety of life. Artistic impoverishment must inevitably follow from rigid and narrow conception of morality. Further, such blind adherence to a definite code challenges the acceptance of the reader. If the reader can accept his faith, it is possible to judge the work by artistic standards. Where the beliefs of the reader clash with those of Bankim Chatterjee, it is impossible for the reader to ignore them. Suspension of belief makes possible the enjoyment of art even when there is no common ground of accepted beliefs. Such suspension is impossible in face of Bankim Chatterjee's clamorous insistence in his own dogmas. This is one of the reasons why his popularity has waned for we have moved away from the beliefs of his time. It also explains why his work has always irritated men of other faith and prevented them from appraising it for merely its literary worth.

Bankim Chatterjee was, therefore, not only a writer with a purpose : he was a partisan and a propagandist Purpose is a necessary condition of great art but not partisanship Propaganda destroys its essence by tying it down to a narrow and definite end One may perhaps express the difference between Bankim Chatterjee and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee by saying that with Sarat Chandra, conservatism was an element in his art but Bankim is himself a conservative Labels are ruinous for an artist and so far as Bankim Chatterjee can be labelled, he loses in artistic stature

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's affiliations in this and other respects to Rabindranath Tagore are obvious Chatterjee could never express sufficiently his debt of gratitude to Tagore Tagore's *Gora* was his standard of excellence, he used to say He had read *Gora* almost like a text and modelled his work on it Even the casual reader notes how Chatterjee has adopted and adapted the language of Tagore Tagore pruned away the Sanskritic excrescences of Bengali and made it quick and supple Its old stiffness disappears and it acquires in his hands a wonderful resil-

hence and expressiveness Chatterjee has little else to do but extend the range of its application and discover a new conversational ease in it

Chatterjee is indebted to Tagore not only for his language but also for his outlook on life Before Tagore, there have been sceptics in Bengal but their influence was personal, not literary Madhusudan Dutt was also a rebel and a sceptic, but he was a great poet and people could afford to look at his scepticism as an ingradient of poetic disbelief Tagore attacks the very bases of current conventions In his *Chokher Bali* and *Gora* and even more in his *Ghare Bahire*, he attempts a revaluation of accepted values He protests against the wrongs inherent in social tyranny and condemns inequities even when sanctioned by antique traditions In a word, Tagore is the pioneer of modernism in Bengalee life and letters, Chatterjee is perhaps his greatest disciple

Chatterjee also shares with Tagore his artistic detachment Both are purposive writers but their purpose is never allowed to degenerate into mere propaganda Tagore's freedom from conscious preach-

ing is even greater and his mind shows a larger expressiveness Chatterjee used his conservative leanings to ballast his art but Tagore needs no ballast other than his sense of beauty Not that this has not its dangers At times, Tagore's creations have an ethereal quality that proclaim them to be denizens of another world Chatterjee's characters are always men and women of concrete flesh and blood Where they live they proclaim their relationship to us Where they lack in vitality it is on account of a failure in the inspiration of their creator Where Tagore fails it is because his characters are too ethereal Chatterjee's are of the earth, earthy

This may be explained in another way by saying that in spite of Tagore's deep and many sided influence on Chatterjee Chatterjee's work is characterised by a stronger sense of reality Even when they deal with similar themes this difference soon reveals itself Both Tagore and Chatterjee have built stories round the small conflicts and reconciliations within the family that break the dull monotony of life in Bengal The family is here the unit and seeks to reconcile the various and

at times conflicting interests of the different individuals who constitute it. They have their personal lives, but the course of such life runs on a low key and is hardly perceptible in normal circumstances. Wants are few and pleasures fewer. Our society offers little scope for variety and not only the social relationships but even the individual beings tend to become standardised. Because, they are human beings this process of depersonalisation can never be complete. Sometimes, conflicts arise and disturb the tranquil flow of family life. Whenever a conflict arises, hidden preferences reveal themselves. The individuals acquire a new personality and the unity of the family cracks along lines which a discerning observer could have foreseen. But, there is always an incalculable element in human affairs. Some times the grouping of the individuals does not correspond to the grouping of interests, nor to our preconceptions about it. Uncertainties enter and the human interest begins to dominate the social valuations.

Such is the general type of many of the stories of Tagore and Chatterjee. The accustomed tempo of social or family life

and familiar divisions within it are disturbed by individual idiosyncrasies. Problems arise and out of them the possibility of a story. For, once the accustomed solution fails, there are infinite ways of attempting a new synthesis or equilibrium.

In spite of this structural similarity, Chatterjee's method and outlook are quite different from those of Tagore. Tagore selects a typical case of conflict and paints it in general terms. Often he invests it with lyric beauty and makes it a symbol of some deep insight into human relationships. Events are, therefore, few in his stories and they are overlaid with interpretation. Narration gives place to analysis and facts are used only for their suggestive value. Chatterjee is more concerned with the social significance of the conflicts he delineates. He may select a typical case but his aim is to make it real and concrete. Events, therefore, assume a new importance in his work, for they express the characteristic quality of the individuals involved. Interpretation and analysis is suggested through the interaction of the characters and lyric beauty is permitted only if it helps in the deve-

lopment of action Chatterjee thus gains in closer adherence to concrete humanity what he loses in universal symbolism.

What is true of the short stories is equally true of the novels Chatterjee is often associated in our minds with revolt against traditions and a fearless exposure of social ills We admire him for his courage in the analysis of unsocial and forbidden love, his scathing criticism of social prejudice and snobbery and his revaluation of the relations between the sexes But he is in each respect only carrying forward what Tagore had begun Tagore also in his novels posed the problems of love and sex, of emotional urges and social inhibitions, of the conflict between tradition and the instincts It is only method and outlook that distinguish Chatterjee's *Grihadaha* from Tagore's *Chokher Bali* A great many of the problems in *Sesh Prashna* are already anticipated, and perhaps with greater skill, in *Ghare Baire* And, yet, Tagore does not seem an iconoclast like Chatterjee One reason is that Tagore's characters are more idealised and universal They express the common demonstrators of humanity in the East

and the West That is why they have received the same quality and quantity of appreciation both at home and abroad Chatterjee's characters are on the other hand more particularised Their social context enters into the essence of their being and gives them their peculiar racial flavour It is more difficult for a foreigner to enter in to the minds of his characters but, when he does so, the significance of Bengali life and character are revealed to him in all their aspects

The real difference between Tagore and Chatterjee is thus to be found in the differing purposes of their art Tagore's first concern is the creation of beauty He is first and foremost an artist Chatterjee also is an artist but his main concern is even more with social significance He wants to penetrate into the heart of social inter-relationships He believes that this will not only achieve the beauty of art, it will also help to resolve the conflict and hatred between man and man A deep sense of social purpose gives to Chatterjee's work its intensely human flavour

One can divide his work into four types according to the degree of purpose present

in them. Even those which seem at first sight to be instances of pure art reveal on closer analysis a hidden purpose. Into this first group fall stories like *Bindur Chhele*, *Ramer Sumati*, or *Ekadashi Bairagi*. The social purpose begins to discover itself more clearly in the works of the second group, though even in them the story follows its own rhythm. They have a purpose, but the purpose is ingrained in the story itself. *Palli Samaj*, *Shrikanta* or *Charitraheen* are specimens of this type. To the third group belong stories like *Arakshaniya*, *Grihadaha* or *Bamuner Meye* in which the purpose assumes a self-conscious form. It is no longer concealed in the story and has a distinct value of its own. The last group contain stories like *Pather Dabi* or *Sesh Prashna* whose art is often a mere pretence for the message. The objective cannot be mistaken here and the story must mould itself to become the vehicle for its expression.

In works of the first group, the main interest is in the human relationships. No problem is directly posed but the human situation suggests to us problems. *Ekadashi Bairagi* obviously poses a pro-

blem, but what exactly is it? *Bindur Chhele* is a more representative case. The story is built up round Bindu's inordinate love for Amulya. She has no child of her womb and all her affection is showered on him. But, even in her love there is selfish quality. Her pride, her intolerance and her superciliousness make her love an uncertain and dangerous quantity. She cannot tolerate that anybody else should love or caress him, and still less that he should be friendly to anybody else. This is an impossible demand and must lead to a crisis. The conflict in the family arises out of her aggressive love and can be resolved only when suffering has humbled her. Such conflict and solution have obvious social implications, though the interest of the story may momentarily blind us to the fact.

In works of the second group, the social content becomes more explicit. It cannot, however, be extracted from the story. Chatterjee is content to pose the problem and attempts no solution. Life's little ironies are felt in all their sorrow and futility, but Chatterjee is content to embody them in his stories without at-

tempting a solution. He describes love and its frustration in *Shrikanta*, but he does not tell us how the problem can be solved within the frame-work of its assumptions. Annada Didi responded to the call of tradition and suffered. Indra Nath followed the impulses of his heart and he also suffered. Shrikanta and Raj Lakshmi are deeply conscious of their love for one another and yet can find no way of fulfilling it. Raj Lakshmi is a widow and mother to her step-son. Loyalty to her widowhood conflicts with her loyalty to Shrikanta. Excepting Abhoya, who resolves the conflict by denying the social code, none of the characters in this group even attempt to rebel. Love of Roma and Ramesh in *Palli Samaj* is turned into a mockery. Sabitri of *Charitraheen* must live a loveless and frustrated life. Chatterjee sees the futility and the waste and his deepest sympathies are stirred. He, however, suggests no solution or remedy. His art is content to perceive and represent: it does not as yet seek to interpret or recreate.

The emergence of a more definite attitude to these social and individual pro-

blems characterises the works of the third group Chatterjee is no longer content merely to observe and record but must also interpret and resolve His sympathy with suffering is deep as ever but is now crossed by a note of bitterness against hypocrisy and fraud The sarcasm in his work deepens, but Chatterjee is too human to identify the sinner with his sins Like Tagore, he also has the artistic detachment that can contemplate evil without asperity In *Bamuner Meye* there is a scathing exposure of the cant of racial exclusiveness and pride In the hierarchy of caste, the Brahmin occupies the highest place and among Brahmins, the 'kulin' is the most distinguished Sandhya, the heroine, is a daughter of the bluest of 'kulin' families and is deeply conscious of the fact She is not only proud of her birth but also conscious of its responsibilities The traditions of family purity must be maintained She cannot taint her blood by marrying beneath her rank She, therefore, rejects the love of her childhood companion, also a Brahmin but of lesser breed She loves him, but an aristocrat cannot marry for love Nobility is more important than personal happiness Her

marriage is arranged with another 'kulin' of equally distinguished pedigree. It is immaterial that he is old enough to be her grandfather. Though old and decrepit, he has in his veins the bluest of blue blood. But fate has a terrible irony in store for Sandhya. She rejects her childhood love because of his lower family status, but on her marriage night she learns that she herself has no status at all. Her grandfather, bluest of the blue among 'kulins,' had scores of wives scattered all over Bengal. People felt honoured by offering their daughters to him. He exploited their weakness and made a profession of marriage. It was the means to his livelihood. Most of his wives saw him only once a year, when he went on his round of collecting fees. As he grew older, it was difficult to visit the wives who lived far away. He sent a deputy, confident that people who had seen him only once would hardly discover the substitution. The deputy, was a barber, member of one of the lowest castes in the Hindu social hierarchy. He visited the wives and collected the fees. The orders on him were strict, but human flesh is weak and Sandhya's grandmother had been exquisitely pretty. There was a

scandal but in the meantime, Sandhya's father had been born. The matter was hushed up, the unfortunate woman gave up the world and the family moved to a new area. Now, on the night of Sandhya's marriage, all this comes to light. Proud of her birth and social status, Sandhya at last discovers that she is the illegitimate descendant of a lowly barber.

We can already in this group notice the beginning of fissures in the structure of his art. The fate of Sandhya has in it an unconvincing element. Her history cannot be dismissed as altogether improbable, for even stranger things happen in life. In fact, it has even been suggested that the story is based on an actual incident. Such defence is irrelevant, for imagination has to cast a veil of verisimilitude on facts to make them acceptable in art. Still this group shows attempt at artistic synthesis of the social message. Some have even held that *Grihadaha* in this group is Chatterjee's greatest work.

The last phase of Chatterjee's work sometimes abandons even the pretence of art. The last phase in logical order, not in point of time. In them it is the message

that is important and it takes on a new insistence. Art tends to degenerate into propaganda, though Chatterjee's skill is never altogether absent. It is a great testimony to his craft that he is able to retain the interest of his readers in spite of the frankly doctrinaire character of much of his later writing. That he succeeds as well as he does, is due to two factors. He selects a theme that is of burning interest to his audience and he treats it with sincerity and passion. The interest of the theme covers many faults and his sincerity disarms opposition. Also, he never altogether loses his artistic detachment, though it is often perilously near the limit. Further, he uses the belief in his progress to bolster up his treatment. Kamal in *Sesh Prashna* is modern with a vengeance. She believes in Progress and all her ideas fit in with contemporary beliefs about social advancement. *Pather Dabi* centres round the activities of a revolutionary. The Indian mind instinctively sympathises with his efforts for achieving the political freedom of the country. Such figures are romantic. They live in the constant shadow of death and have a secret life which intrigues even when it

terrifies. In this situation, the critical faculties are dulled. The author can get away with many things which a more alert consciousness would have rejected. In *Pather Dabi* or *Sesh Prashna*, the reader, therefore, hardly notes how the author's imagination often flags. The conception of character is often unreal and schematic. For the first time in Chatterjee's work, we meet with characters that are wholly evil. Such works had immediate and immense popularity. So did the works of Bankim Chatterjee. Who can be sure that these works of Sarat Chandra will not share the same fate as those of Bankim Chatterjee?

CHAPTER IV

ARTISTIC imagination and variety of experience made Chatterjee a revolutionary and a purposive writer. It also gave him a new consciousness of the dignity of man. His childhood experiences of different social types showed him how grievously social judgment can err in its estimation of the worth of a man. One society condones or even exalts what another society condemns. In Burma, he saw how the loosening of social bonds brought out not only evil in man but also exquisite human qualities. He also saw how external the social relations remain for him. They are casual and are discarded on the slightest pretext. The consciousness deepened in him that it is man that matters not his social stamp.

One expression of the revolutionary quality of Chatterjee's mind is seen in his sympathy with the outcaste and the oppressed. He is always on the side of the underdog. The victim, not the victor wins his heart. This is only another aspect of his love for the common man. The com-

mon man is made up of strength and weakness, of merits and faults. Even his morality is negative, for, if he has not transgressed, it is perhaps because he has not had the chance. Those who have fallen are more to be pitied for their weakness than condemned for their perversity. And even if they are to be blamed, who is there so blameless among us as can cast the first stone on a sinner? An infinite pity and tenderness towards erring and suffering humanity permeates all Chatterjee's work.

In orthodox Hindu society, perhaps in all orthodox societies, a woman who has once transgressed the sexual code is put outside the pale. Chatterjee is perhaps the first writer in Bengal who asserts that physical chastity and human excellence need not be synonymous. This has always been recognised in respect of men and society has looked at male transgressions with a kindly eye. His right to sow wild oats is almost a recognised right. Men are not eternally damned just because they have allowed their hot blood to carry them away. Whether it be for the determination of paternity or the securing of

inheritance, with women it has been otherwise. Physical chastity has been the only test of a woman's worth and whatever her other qualities, they have all been wasted by a single lapse in her sexual life. We do not tolerate a man's impudence or treachery simply because he is sexually chaste. Often we prefer a generous libertine to a cantankerous prig. Chatterjee boldly applied this principle to the conception of woman's character.. Women, he declared must be also judged by the same standards as men. Have we not often come across women who pride in their virtue and respectability and are yet mean and catty in their dealings with dependents and selfish and grasping in their social relations? Chaste bullies are not rare in society, among women as well as men. Chatterjee presents to us the other side of the medal, the picture of women who are the outcasts of society and yet full of a grace and beauty that is exquisite.

His revolutionary urge widened the sympathy and imagination of Chatterjee in two directions. It made him seek human value and dignity in those whom

society has discarded Even rakes and prostitutes, vagabonds and drunkards have elements of innate nobility in their character Given suitable circumstances, they can rise to heights that astonish and delight our human sympathies If even the fallen and the outcaste have in them a hidden greatness, what about men and women in the lower walks of life ? Literature has only recently recognised them as human individuals In the past, they were merely cogs and wheels in the social machinery Necessary as instruments for ministering to the needs of the heroes and the heroines, they were permitted to enter the sacred precincts of art without any human significance of their own Here again, Chatterjee is perhaps the first writer of Bengal who draws his characters from the lowly walks of life, and conceives of them as human individuals with all the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears that their more fortunate fellows have

In both these respects, Chatterjee's affinities with Charles Dickens are striking Both were members of the lower middle class and both derived their inspiration from its life Both are at their best

are derived from social wrecks. The characters are such that we rarely come across them in life. It may be that once in a thousand years, a woman like Sabitri flowers in the context of her social and personal history. Annada Didi or Kamal are perhaps even rarer occurrences. Yet, they are the characters we continually meet in Chatterjee's works. Does not this result in a falsification of life, in the creating of an impression as if these exquisite types must bloom only in these disreputable surroundings? Like a lotus which must have its roots in the treacherous mud?

Chatterjee's reply would be that nobility and excellence are equally rare in conventional society and in the fellowship of the outcaste. If the characters are unreal, condemnation is certainly his due. If however, his imagination has vitalised them, it is irrelevant whether they are rare specimens of humanity or common as the blackberries on a hedge. And it must be conceded to him that he has often succeeded. Many of the characters live not only in our memory but also in our imagination and our hearts.

The range and depth of his experience gave reality to his portrayals. His integrity and courage delight and shock us. His vigour and energy sweep us along and do not let us pause to examine how far his work has verisimilitude. His sarcasm and satire sting us to the quick and make us range with those whom he defends. His tenderness and sentimentality strike us at our weakest spot and make us blind to his failures. It is not for nothing that Chatterjee is the most popular writer that Bengal has ever known. Bengal took him to her heart and loved him as perhaps a writer has never been loved. That there are defects in his art, that his imagination at times fails him, that he is often guilty of false sentimentality, that a tinsel intellectualism often blurs his judgment—all these are facts. But they are all forgotten in his great love for Bengal and her common folk. He loved them and they loved him in return.

This is perhaps the most significant fact about Chatterjee. He rediscovered Bengal for the common man and in the discovery made him uncommon. He for the first time revealed what wonderful

potentialities of development are inherent in the average man. -He, for the first time showed what loves and hates, what strivings and frustrations, what comedies and tragedies are hidden behind the apparent monotony of Bengali life. If Chatterjee had done nothing else, this alone would have secured his place in the history of Bengali civilisation.

APPENDIX

BOOKS BY SARAT CHANDRA CHATTERJEE

- 1 Biraj Bow (13th Edition)
- 2 Bindur Chhele (Cheap 3th edition)
" " (Royal Edition)
- 3 Baradidi (12th edition)
- 4 Pandit Mohasay 1 (5th edition)
- 5 Arakshanaya (11th edition)
- 6 Baikunther Will (7th edition)
- 7 Mejdidi (7th edition)
- 8 Chandranath (14th edition)
- 9 Parimta (23rd edition)
- 10 Debdas (6th edition)
- 11 Srikanta (1st Part 7th edition)
- 12 " (2nd Part 5th edition)
- 13 " (3rd Part 5th edition)
- 14 " (4th Part 3rd edition)
- 15 Kashunath (4th edition)
- 16 Niskrita (5th edition)
- 17 Charitrahin (5th edition)
- 18 Swami (14th edition)
- 19 Datta (6th edition)
- 20 Chhabi
- 21 Grihadaha
- 22 Palli Samaj (15th edition)
- 23 Bamuner Maye (8rd edition)
- 24 Dena Paona (4th edition)
- 25 Naba Bidhan (3rd edition)

APPENDIX

TRANSLATED INTO HINDI

1. Parnita
2. Chhabi
3. Kashunath
4. Shrikanta
5. Shrikanta
6. Shrikanta
7. Swami
8. Baikunther Will
9. Harilakshmi
10. Shodashi
11. Nishkriti
12. Debdas
13. Bandidi
14. Pandit Mohasaya
15. Mejdidi
16. Roma
17. Pather Dabi
18. Anuradha, Satce and Paresh
19. Grihadaha

} Three Parts.

- APPENDIX

TRANSLATED INTO GUJARATI.

1. Biraj Bow
2. Baradidi
3. Chandranath
4. Parinita
5. Debdas
6. Shrikant Part I
7. " " II
8. " " III
9. " " IV
10. Kashinath
11. Charitrahin
12. Swami
13. Datta
14. Chhabi
15. Grihadaha
16. Palli Samaj
17. Seshprashna
18. Bipradas
19. Anuradha Satec & Paresh
20. Shubhada
21. Pather Dabi.
22. Bhairavi
23. Arakshaniya
24. "Three Stories"
25. Gnanda.
26. Shodashi
27. Jivan yatra
28. Hema Bahen
29. Alaka
30. Kulvati.



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